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Many students like poetry, but they don't like the constraints placed upon the reading of poetry in school and wonder why they have to "criticize" and "analyze" it. Thinking about and working with poetry stretches the brain in new and different ways, so teachers assign it, despite the fact that some students will fight the challenge. When teachers introduce poetry projects to students in high school, many students groan aloud; it is interesting that the students who do like poetry (and there are some of those students!) do not stand up and defend it. Regardless, this poem, on the surface, could be the rallying cry for all of those poetry-haters out there who claim to dislike poetry. Moore begins her poem, titled "Poetry," with the assertion that she dislikes it; "it" is a pronoun for poetry. Not only does she dislike it herself, she is not alone: "I, **too**, dislike it" (line 1). She knows of at least one other person who dislikes it, and she is writing this poem for all those people who agree with her. Despite the fact that she claims to dislike poetry, Moore's poem should be appreciated for its poetic form, evocative imagery, and interesting subject matter.

At first glance, the poem almost looks like prose. In fact, it is very poetic in its structure, consisting of five stanzas of six lines each. On top of that, the first line of each stanza is composed on 19 syllables. That's not an accident. Moore was not writing prose, she was writing *poetry*, line six of each stanza, with the exception the third, has 13 syllables. These things don't just happen by accident, and that's Moore's point. They happen **on purpose** when a person is creating poetry. No one worries about line lengths and syllabication when writing prose; that's

one of the differences between prose and poetry. The form of this poem about why the poet dislikes poetry is ironic, and Moore meant it to be ironic. The poem is a strong one because of that play with the reader; it takes an astute reader, one who is looking for poetic devices, to pick up on the poetic form. Moore certainly didn't put the poem together so that it was easily recognizable, at least by ear, as poetry.

While Moore's form certainly shows that she was a skilled poet, her use of imagery contributes significantly to the poem as poetry rather than prose. The "bat / holding on upside down or in quest of something to / eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a roll, a tireless wolf under / a tree" (11-14) are all things that most people know about in some way or another but not things that the average person studies or thinks about very often. Moore conjures these images to make her readers realize that these things can be thought about poetically so that they can understand (and therefore admire) them rather than allow them to remain unknowable. An interesting image in the poem is the "imaginary garden[s] with real toads" (25). This image summarizes Moore's message: Poets need to use their skill to write about real things even if those real things are ugly. Life is about ugly as well as about beauty, and Moore believes that poets have a responsibility to present the ugliness in a beautiful way rather than mislead readers into thinking that everything is beautiful all the time.

The form and the imagery in the poem helps readers to understand that the poem is not, as it seemed at first glance, about someone **not** liking poetry. Readers have to really dig into it to "get it," but the subject is that Moore doesn't like what was happening to poetry during the time period in which she was writing it. The time period of the first publication of this poem is known as the "Modernist" era, and writers were beginning to be more realistic and less romantic in their art. It was a time of change for the United States, and that change was being reflected in

the literature. While Moore certainly advocated for “keeping it real,” she also wanted poets to continue to hone their artistry, urging them to “rise above insolence and triviality” and “present / for inspection, ‘imaginary gardens with real toads in them’” (24-25). She wants poets to get over themselves and give the people what they want: accessible poetry that ordinary folks want to read rather than flowery stuff that readers have to work at figuring out. She says that everyday things (“hands that can grasp, eyes / that can dilate, hair that can rise” [4-5]) are not important because someone can analyze them and elevate them to poetic language but because they are useful. Poets of the day were to take note, to be careful of being labeled “half poets” (20), and to write about real things in a poetic way that didn’t use overworked language. Pablo Neruda took note of this in writing his odes to common things, and poets today have taken note since much contemporary poetry presents the toads as well as the gardens. “Poetry” by Marianne Moore demands that poets pay attention to the world as they are crafting their work, but the poem doesn’t give permission to write bad poetry. This poem offers much to think about for the poet and reader alike.

Work Cited

Moore, Marianne. “Poetry.” *The Norton Introduction to Poetry*. Ed. J. Paul Hunter. 3rd ed.
New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1986.